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MATACHEWAN MINE TAILINGS SPILL UPDATE

Three weeks after a mine tailings dam overflowed near Matachewan, the turbid plume of spilled material is still winding its way along the Montreal River downstream to Lake Timiskaming.

About 150,000 cubic metres of tailings were released when a tailings dam at the old Matachewan Consolidated Mines property failed on October 17, 1990, after water levels rose in Otisse Lake. The tailings - residuals left behind from mining and milling processes - turned the water in some areas mud-brown and raised lead levels above the Ontario Drinking Water Objective.

Environment Ontario is working with other provincial ministries and agencies to contain the spill, monitor the plume and protect all residents and communities in the area -- particularly those drawing water directly from the river.

Lead and turbidity levels

As of November 7, 1990, lead concentrations in the Montreal River from Matachewan to Elk Lake were below the Ontario Drinking Water Objective of .01. While lead levels are expected to decline in the remainder of the river as the plume moves downstream, turbidity levels remain high throughout the entire length of the plume. The head of the plume has now travelled approximately 150 kilometres from Matachewan downstream past Elk Lake and Latchford.

Alternate water sources

The Medical Officer of Health for the Timiskaming area has issued a letter to property owners warning that water drawn directly from the river between Elk Lake and south of Latchford is unfit for drinking or cooking. Potable water is available by contacting the town offices at Elk Lake, Latchford or Coleman.

Elk Lake
Two wells are supplying water for all purposes to residents in the community. Bottled drinking water is available to residents not supplied by the well system. About 30 residents downstream who draw water directly from the Montreal River, have had filtration units installed by Environment Ontario. These units reduce turbidity and leave the water suitable for household uses other than drinking or cooking.

Latchford
The municipal water treatment plant continues to supply the majority of residents with water for all purposes. A few residents, not on the system or who draw water directly from the Montreal River, have been provided with filtration units. Bottled drinking water is available at the town office. Shore or near-shore wells are being monitored for turbidity, and will be supplied with filtration units if warranted.

Water quality monitoring

Environment Ontario will continue to monitor river water quality for as long as necessary until pre-spill conditions are obtained. Pre-spill information is based on historical river water quality monitoring data and current data being collected. Sampling is also being conducted to determine the long-term impact of the tailings on aquatic life. Water quality information is available to river users on an ongoing basis.

Well water testing

While the tailings contamination is not expected to affect well supplies along the rivers, selected wells in the area are being tested as a precaution. Anyone concerned about the quality of their well water should contact the town offices in Elk Lake or Latchford to arrange to have their well tested.

Compensation concerns?

If you feel you have a potential claim as a result of the spill or want information on compensation, please contact the Environmental Compensation Corporation, Suite 1203, Box 2382, 2300 Yonge Street, Toronto, Ontario M4S 1H2, or call collect (416) 323-4826.

For more information

For plume and water quality information, please contact the town offices in Elk Lake or Latchford. For health effect questions, please contact the Timiskaming Health Unit location in your area.

November 7, 1990

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